

**Cultural Capitals: Revaluating the Arts, Remaking Urban Spaces**, Louise C. Johnson. Ashgate: Farnham, England, 2009, 282 pages. ISBN: 978-0-7546-4977-9. £60.00 (hardback)

Pitched on its back cover as “an optimistic book about the power of the arts to enhance city images, urban economies and communities”, Louise Johnson’s *Cultural Capitals* is a book that stands apart from a more critical body of work on the role of culture and creativity in shaping of cities around the globe. Rather than dismissing the deployment of ‘The Arts’ as economic instrumentalism, her central argument is that it should instead be viewed as “a positive response”, one that “re-values creative endeavour, difference and communities” (5). In this Johnson is overt about who she is taking on: the “unnecessarily pessimistic” (7) and even “grinding” (45) perspectives of Sharon Zukin, Rosalin Deutche and David Harvey, who she feels have inherited a deep scepticism from the Frankfurt School academic, Theodore Adorno. As she reasons, “if in the process of making a Cultural Capital, creativity is mobilised to effect political, social, cultural, as well as economically sustainable outcomes, then the city and world become better places for it” (57). This is a compelling and ideologically rich line of reasoning, explicitly focused on the positive and sustainable benefits of The Arts in reimagining, revaluating and remaking the city.

*Cultural Capitals* is structured in a standard format for a monograph of this kind; with the first three chapters used to establish Johnson’s theoretical and empirical agenda for the work ahead. Chapter One sets the scene with UNESCO figures, building up a picture of the growing economic and political significance of the creative industries from a global outlook. Chapter Two makes an effective introduction to a number of perspectives on cultural capital, ranging across key studies in economics, sociology, tourism studies and human geography. It is also here that the author outlines her use of Pierre Bourdieu’s original work on cultural capital, noting the different registers over

which it can be seen to operate in urban space: embodied, objectified and institutional (52-53). This provides a neat framework for the empirical chapters that follow, particularly for the scale at which she seeks to draw comparisons. Chapter Three establishes the core themes of her study, the discourses of globalisation, post-modernity and economic restructuring as they might be understood through a specific kind of city, the Cultural Capital.

The middle chapters of *Cultural Capitals* deal with empirical case studies of four 'second order' cities in turn: Glasgow to illustrate cultural tourism and design; Bilbao and its Guggenheim museum as a post-modern city of spectacle; Singapore as post-colonial city of cultural heritage and performance; and finally, Geelong, Australia, as an example of the pervasive as well as persuasive magic of the cultural capital industry. In avoiding the standard canon of major world cities, the author achieves a good balance of familiar and more refreshing insights of different modes of cultural capital in operation. I laughed out loud to her descriptions of the sinister role played by Frank Gehry in Bilabao. Likewise, I felt the strength of her distaste for the social injustices contained in the recent redesigning of Singapore following Stamford Raffles' original 1822 plan for the city. Her emphasis on the local diversity and unintended effects of mobilising cultural capital allude to the apparent weaknesses of such an agenda and, as a whole, these chapters present a lucid synergy of statistics and major commentaries that clearly explain the crucial geographical conditions under which different creative capitals have emerged.

In the final, concluding chapter, the ways such Cultural Capitals can be seen to have enhanced both city images and urban economies seems well drawn together. Yet, reflecting on the community benefits that she claimed at the start of the book, the author is compelled to make an important concession that in all four cities, "artists and communities were all rendered marginal to state-driven re-development agendas" (251). This struck me as precisely the place to start her analysis rather than something to raise on the very last page

of her book. Her reasoning that, “even where there are local conflicts and corporate profits to be made, these do not necessarily preclude the creation of well designed parks, provocative performances and enlivened heritage precincts” (45), and that “such deals are far better than nothing at all” (236), seems a little too sold on the prescriptive and inevitable logic of advanced global capitalism. This is especially surprising given the range and quality of empirical research that features throughout the text largely as a foil to her upbeat argument.

If I’m allowed to be fussy, the perennial ‘author’s fieldnotes’ tend to linger unsubstantiated, particularly the bulleted list in the Glasgow chapter, and I know what I’d say to my students if they cited anonymous figures from Wikipedia on several occasions. None of these details really helped gain a sense of the author exploring these cities from the ground up, working with the depth of local perspectives available. What comes across instead is the figure of the tourist researcher, picking up brochures, public testimonies and other ‘cultural texts’ for a deconstructive, ‘progressive’ reading back at her desk. More profoundly, Johnson’s confidence in the restorative powers of the Creative Class does little to hide her inspiration in the influential figures of Charles Landry, Frederico Bianchini and Richard Florida, particularly her jarring praise for the unspecified creative energies of what she refers to as “artists and gays” (see Peck 2005) . Moreover, her implied reading of creativity as an essentially urban, edgy and spectacular phenomenon overlooks the many vernacular spaces of creativity that would complicate this understanding (see Edensor *et al.* 2009). These are important contemporary debates with a determining effect on how we might think about Cultural Capitals, and cultural capital after Bourdieu, that remain conspicuously absent from her argument.

For me, this is a book that seems intended for urban planners and policy makers, a work that “focuses on the process of creating value” (235) in an effort to reassure their aspirations to remake cities as Cultural Capitals. I

would also recommend it for undergraduate teachers looking for comprehensive geographical understandings of these still rather iconic cities, and developments in cultural readings of the political economy. Johnson does make an effective contribution towards 're-materialising cultural geography' in this sense, and clear connections with the wider book series published by Ashgate. For rather different reasons, both planners and students alike will appreciate Johnson's unusually positive tone and detailed case studies that feature in her intelligently crafted polemic. However, as much as I would like to, I just don't quite share Johnson's optimism. It is not her observations on the ways cities are increasingly remade through the powerful, if elusive, concepts of 'culture' and 'creativity' that is problematic. Rather, it is her surprisingly singular faith in the positive and sustainable effects of 'The Arts' on blighted post-industrial communities that remains unconvincing.

**LUKE DICKENS**

Independent scholar